

Effects of Health Information Websites on Health Care Facility Visits

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Abstract : Introduction: The internet has been widely available with 18 million users in Saudi Arabia alone. It was shown that 58% of Saudis are using the internet as a source of health-related information which may contribute to overcrowding of the Emergency Room (ER). Not many studies have been conducted to show the effect of online searching for health related information (HRI) and its role in influencing internet users to visit various health care facilities. So the main objective is to determine a correlation between HRI website use and health care facility visits in Saudi Arabia. Methodology: By conducting a cross sectional study and distributing a questionnaire, a total number of 1095 people were included in the study. Demographic data was collected as well as questions including the use of HRI websites, type of websites used, the reason behind the internet search, which health care facility it lead them to visit and whether seeking health information on the internet influenced their attitude towards visiting health care facilities. The survey was distributed using an internet survey applications. The data was then put on an excel sheet and analyzed with the help of a biostatistician for making a correlation. Results: We found 91.4% of our population have used the internet for medical information using mainly General medical websites (77.8%), Forums (34.2%), Social Media (21.6%), and government websites (21.6%). We also found that 66.9% have used the internet for medical information to diagnose and treat their medical conditions on their own while 34.7% did so due to the inability to have a close referral and 29.5% due to their lack of time. Searching for health related information online caused 62.5% of people to visit health care facilities. Outpatient clinics were most visited at 77.9% followed by the ER (27.9%). The remaining 37.5% do not visit because using HRI websites reassure them of their condition. Conclusion: In conclusion, there may be a correlation between health information website use and health care facility visits. However, to avoid potentially inaccurate medical information, we believe doctors have an important role in educating their patients and the public on where to obtain the correct information & advertise the sites that are regulated by health care officials.

Keywords : ER visits, health related information, internet, medical websites

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